

# “Raising the Dead”

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*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your*

*brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

*When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

*Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.*

*John 11:1-45*

Mathew, Mark, and Luke have miracles. John has signs. Seven, to be exact—all pointing toward the person of Jesus. They begin with the turning of

water into wine and end with the raising of Lazarus. Ultimately, they all point toward Jesus as the bringer of New Life. They are purposeful.

John tells us explicitly at the end of his gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue [or come] to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Signs in John’s gospel are meant to do something, to elicit something in us—they are meant to enlighten.

These are not mere stories, but instruments of transformation and healing—which means if we are to grasp the deeper meaning of our passage for today we need to listen differently—we need to listen as participants.

Just before our passage for today, we see Jesus’ opponents in Judea gathering stones to stone him. Jesus retreats to the wilderness, where, after receiving word of his friend’s illness, he decides to return, albeit after waiting two days. “Thomas, who was called the Twin,” John tells us, “said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’”

As we’ve seen, in order to be enlightened—in order to cross over into the Promised Land—in order to rise with Jesus—we must first participate in his death. Something within us must die—the fear that keeps us from receiving God’s love—must die within us.

But if something within us must die—we must also learn to rise again—we must also learn to trust that new life, abundant life, is a living possibility for us—not only in the world to come, but right here, right now. Jesus says to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’”

Yes, Lord.

Participating in our own enlightenment, means saying “Yes,” to God—which means saying “Yes,” to a life so worth living that we are willing to loosen

the fear-inspired death-grip that keeps us in our tombs. So worth living that we would dare to live in the promise that it is better on the other side of our fear—even when we cannot yet fully see the other side.

It is perhaps instructive that before both Martha and Mary were able to participate in the resurrection of their brother they had to be willing to show Jesus their very real anger. “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus has been consistent in his insistence that death is not the end here—that it is not even the point, really. “Our friend has fallen asleep,” he says. Even though Lazarus is literally dead, Jesus is really talking about spiritual death here. Throughout John’s gospel we see those who become enlightened first mistaking the literal for the metaphorical, the physical for the spiritual. Enlightenment is a process. And Jesus is graciously patient with us in our process. Anger, frustration, fear—all of these are byproducts of growth—and to that extent, necessary. We do not need to beat ourselves up for not being where we want to be yet. Spiritual growth—enlightenment—healing—is messy. We just need to be willing to get our hands dirty.

Finally, we also must be willing to leave our isolation—to go beyond the cramped tombs of our own self-absorption. When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, Jesus says to the crowd, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Spiritual renewal is essentially a communal affair. Lazarus is not truly born anew until the community releases him from his funereal bonds.

Friends, let us remember who we are: We are a Matthew 25 community—the living, vital body of Christ on earth. Let us participate in the raising of the dead—let us unbind our neighbors from the funereal bonds of structural poverty and systemic racism—even as we are unbound ourselves. Let us stretch our vision and imagination that we might begin to grasp abundant life.

Don’t forget, after the service we will continue preparing ourselves to live out our commitments, as we study Matthew Desmond’s *Poverty, By America*. You don’t have to have read the book—just come and join the dreaming as we prepare for the future we seek. Amen.